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FM AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9568
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO 1143

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARAMARIBO 000411

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WHA/CAR FOR KAREN WILLIAMS AND JACKIE ROSHOLT, USOAS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/05/2017

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SUBJECT: LEGITIMIZATION OR "WHITEWASH?" OAS KICKS OFF
BOUTERSE TRIAL INVOLVEMENT

Classified By: PolOff for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Organization of American States (OAS) Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin visited Suriname from August 1 to August 4 for what he called "information gathering" for a possible OAS observer mission for the trial of Desi Bouterse. Former military strongman Bouterse and twenty-three co-defendants are to go on trial for the 1982 murder of fifteen political opponents. While Ramdin expressed hopes that his presence and that of the OAS would lend legitimacy to the process, members of Bouterse's National Democratic Party of Suriname (NDP) publicly called the trial a "circus" and OAS involvement an attempt by the government of Suriname (GOS) to "whitewash a process that is not clean" and is "sickened by politics." While the OAS probably will lend legitimacy, the NDP argument contains a grain of truth. END SUMMARY

Legitimacy? Ramdin Chooses Himself to Lead Delegation

12. (C) Ramdin spoke with Ambassador, DCM, and PolOff on July 5 about the possibility of sending a fact-finding team to Suriname to "take the pulse" of society in preparation for a possible observer mission, but post had not expected Ramdin himself to lead the delegation. As a Surinamer, Ramdin's appearance in Suriname in conjunction with the trial--even if accompanied by four OAS colleagues (his advisor Sherry Tross of St. Kitts and Nevis, political advisor Gaston Ain of Argentina, judicial advisor Enrique Lagos of Chile, and observer Henriette Lachmisingh of Suriname)--suggests the appearance of a possible conflict of interest. One local newspaper called for him to disassociate himself from the process. However, Ramdin clarified that he felt his personal presence "gives a certain amount of confidence," and said he will definitely not be a part of the actual observer mission.

Ramdin said any potential observer mission would be dependent on two factors: the as-yet unknown start date of the trial, and funding. Ramdin said the OAS needs the former in order to seek the latter. When asked how much advance notice the OAS would need from the GOS in order to plan an observer mission, Ramdin said only "how quickly can you (read: "the U.S.") decide on the funding?" Ramdin said his optimal outcome would be two observers, one legal and one political, who would come and go, supported by a third person who would be a daily monitor and report to the principal observer.

Legitimacy? Ramdin Finds Surinamers Open to Trial Process

13. (C) Ramdin said he conducted more than 40 meetings in

his four days in Suriname, asking for perspectives from government entities including the army and the police, political parties from the opposition and the coalition, the non-governmental and international community, and youth, human rights, religious, social, business, labor, and media groups. Ramdin characterized the feedback as "overwhelming, and overwhelmingly positive," and said he found most groups ready to openly discuss the trial--something he felt would not have been possible a few years ago in Suriname. Ramdin did not report any negative reactions, although he did say several groups expressed concerns about whether the OAS was in Suriname in support of any one particular agenda, and that his interlocutors had mixed opinions about the competence and capacity of the Surinamese judiciary.

14. (C) Ramdin specifically stated his information gathering team would not be meeting with judges, because that would oblige him to meet also with prosecutors and defense teams in order demonstrate "transparency, professionalism, accountability, and fairness." Ramdin emphasized that the OAS mission was "not here to take the government of Suriname's position," but rather to know how various sectors of society view the issue and the process. Ramdin said "fact-finding" was too strong a term as it implied that the OAS would be investigating the case itself, which it will not.

15. (C) Ramdin noted that there was widespread consensus among those he had met on respect for the rule of law, and that he sensed "a search for truth, beyond justice." He noted the importance of preparing the public for all possible outcomes of the trial (e.g., acquittal, guilty verdict, and anything in between) which he opined could last either from eight to twelve or from eighteen to twenty-four months, depending on whether the GOS would like the trial to end well before the 2010 elections or just as they approach.

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"Whitewash?" Political Opposition Displeased

16. (C) One of the groups which almost certainly expressed concern would have been Bouterse's NDP, which Ramdin said "asked very pointed questions" during his meeting with a small group of three NDP representatives. While Ramdin considered the NDP's willingness to meet "out of respect for the OAS" a good sign, just hours after their meeting Harvey Naarendorp, leader of the NDP delegation (and himself a suspect in the murder trial), publicly called the trial a "circus" and reiterated the NDP's position that an observer mission is not necessary. Naarendorp said the fact that the government requested observers indicates that the GOS wants to use the OAS to "whitewash a process that is not clean," and "get international acceptance for a process which is in principle sickened with politics." Bouterse himself had no public comment.

No Forecast for Start Date

17. (C) Ramdin indicated that "the GOS feels it is ready to start the trial; however, it is the judiciary that must set the date." "The delivery of subpoenas will indicate when the trial is likely to start," he added.

18. (C) COMMENT: Ramdin's reputation for neutrality, and the respect he receives as "the greatest thing to ever happen to Surinamese diplomacy" (as one Surinamese analyst privately described him), likely mitigate the questionable effect that his personal involvement in the observer mission creates, and his stature may even strengthen it. Moreover, Ramdin stressed that he would not return to Suriname as a member of any observer mission (paragraph 2 above). Ramdin is probably also correct that OAS observation helps legitimize the trial:

the OAS still has enormous standing following its successful intervention to help resolve the 1980s civil conflict known as the Interior War.

19. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: However, this is part of the problem as well: the NDP argues that any trial would be illegitimate, no matter how carefully its legal parameters are constructed. The NDP reasons that, when a government puts its chief political opponent on trial, the trial is by definition political. As the largest political party in opposition to President Venetiaan's ruling coalition, there is merit to the NDP's logic: simply by recognizing the trial, the OAS has played into GOS hands. While the trial and OAS observers are probably both good things--Bouterse is unquestionably very bad for Suriname--it is also very sensitive, and the OAS (and those who support the observer mission) will have to be very careful to remain neutral, both in fact and in appearance. END COMMENT
SCHREIBER HUGHES